



Identifying seals



Harbour seal



Grey seal

Grey and harbour (or common) seals can be seen all year round largely on the coast of Scotland. To the untrained eye, telling the difference between a grey and a harbour seal can be quite difficult. Other (Arctic) seal species are occasionally sighted including harp, hooded, bearded and ringed seals, and even walrus.

Heads in the water

When viewed in profile, grey seals have much flatter noses ('a Roman nose') than harbour seals, whose faces are more dished (they have relatively distinct foreheads). Grey seals' eyes are located midway between the nose and the

back of the head; harbour seals' eyes (and mouths) are very much on the front of the face, closer to the nose. Unlike harbour seals, grey seals have double chins. In terms of the overall head shape, an oval drawn around a harbour seal's head would need to be squashed from top to bottom while one drawn around a grey seal's head would be squashed from side to side.

Body size

Grey seals are the larger of the two species. Adult greys are around 1.8 to 2.1m long, while adult harbour are 1.3 to 1.7m.



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Pelage markings

There are differences in the coats pattern or 'pelage', of the two species. Harbour seals are usually fairly uniformly spotted while grey seals have more obviously contrasting pale bellies and darker grey backs, with larger more irregularly shaped spots and blotches. Male grey seals have darker coats than females. A word of warning – a seal's pelage can look very different depending on whether it is wet or dry, and also when it is going through its annual moult (December to March for grey seals and July to September for harbour seals).



Harbour seals are visible to the rear of this picture, with grey seals nearer the water

Haulout behaviour

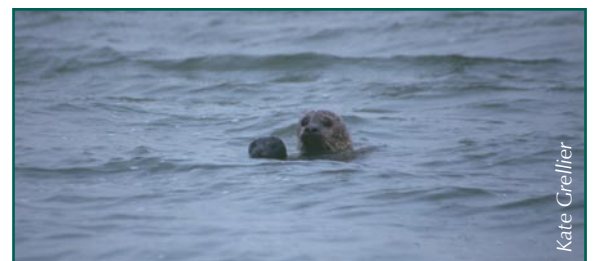
Both species tend to haul out in groups, but grey seals lie much closer together than harbour seals. When moving at speed on land harbour seals wriggle along like caterpillars while grey seals almost bounce along. The noises they make are different too. If you hear a haunting howl coming from a group of seals, there will be one or more grey seals in there. Harbour seals are silent in comparison.



Grey seal mother and pup

Pupping season

Major differences between grey and harbour seals concerns when, and how, they pup. Grey seals congregate above the high water mark on remote beaches and islands between September and December to pup. Females remain ashore for three weeks or so while suckling their white-coated pup. In contrast, harbour seals pup on intertidal sandbanks or rocks in June and July. Their pups are far more precocious. They are born with their spotted adult coat and will swim with their mothers within hours of birth.



Harbour seal mother and pup